

MUHAMMAD

ISLAM IS TO-DAY one of the most widely spread religions in the world, and its followers number about seven hundred millions. They are to be found amongst many races and nations, and in almost every part of the world. In India, Islam is a living force, and the Muslims are very progressive. The inhabitants of Turkistan, Afghanistan, Persia, Mesopotamia, Turkey, Arabia, Syria and Palestine are all Muslims, and firmly believe in Islamic faith, culture and civilisation. The whole of North Africa professes the faith preached by Muhammad ; and in East and South Africa there are large numbers of the Faithful. Compared with Asia there are not many Muslims in Europe, though probably some are to be found in every country. The greatest number of European Muslims live in Russia ; and to a lesser extent in Poland and some of the smaller countries. In China they number forty millions, but in America there are very few.

Islam was founded in Arabia about thirteen hundred years ago. Before that time the country was in a deplorable condition, and was passing through what may be described as the dark age. The people were in a state of semi-barbarism and their ideas of religion and morality were those of savages. It is true that they believed in one God, but they worshipped Him in rather a strange way. They thought that God could not Himself look after all the inhabitants of the earth, and had, therefore, entrusted the management of the universe to different gods and goddesses. These gods could cure the sick, grant boons to all who asked for them, and make the world safe for the habitation of man.

If an epidemic broke out, they alone could stamp it out ; and when there was famine, it was only their help that could bring it to an end. Can we wonder, therefore, that the people offered sacrifices to them, and tried to appease them in every possible way ?

But where were these gods ? They could not be seen anywhere on the earth, and the people wanted to worship something material which could be seen. The result was that they worshipped stones and trees, especially the former, of which they were very fond. In the Kaaba alone, it is said, there were three hundred and sixty idols, but in addition to these, every tribe and every household had its own idol. People were given so much to the worship of idols, that when a person went on a journey, he would carry four pieces of stone with him. Three of these were used to make a hearth, and the fourth served as an object of reverence. They also worshipped the stars, which they thought had a mysterious influence on the destinies of man.

The majority of the people worshipped idols or stars, but there were also atheists in the country who believed neither in God nor in the hereafter. On the whole it may be said that these early Arabs had become very indifferent towards religion, and their belief in their idols was but superficial.

There is a story told of a man whose father had been murdered. He consulted an oracle to know whether or not he should avenge the murder, but every time he did so, the answer was in the negative. At last, mad with rage, he said, 'Wretch, had it been the murder of thine own father, thou wouldst not have forbidden me to avenge it.'

In addition to religious evils, the Arabs suffered from many others both political and social. They had no strong central government, and a peaceful and well-ordered life was almost unknown. Arabia was inhabited by many small tribes, which were constantly at war with one another,

These disputes were usually due to very trivial causes, but the consequences were very often disastrous. A word of scorn spoken at a poetical contest, a gesture of contempt during a horse-race, or a mere brawl in a street, would incite people to warfare and result in the deaths of many men. These feuds were handed down from one generation to another, and sometimes whole tribes were wiped out in these wars. The Arabs frankly believed that might was right and did not think that bloodshed and plunder were at all wrong.

In social matters the Arabs were very backward. Most of them were nomads, that is, they did not stay in one place, but wandered wherever they could find water to drink and fodder for their cattle, and at such places they pitched their camel-hair tents. Women occupied a very lowly position, and were regarded as an item of property, which could be inherited like lands and cattle. For this reason a woman had no share in the property of her husband or her father, and at her husband's death the heir could dispose of her in any way he liked. Sometimes he would marry her himself, or give her in marriage to someone else. She could be divorced on the slightest pretext, not once only, but many times. Polygamy was practised by the Arabs, and a man could take as many wives as he pleased.

The Arabs had no regard for women, and looked upon them merely as objects of pleasure. The birth of a daughter was not a welcome event in a household. Nevertheless, woman inspired Arab poets, and even though they did not have a very high conception of her character, they sang of her physical charms and beauty.

Besides their love of sport and fighting, the Arabs were fond of drinking and gambling. They drank large quantities of wine, especially on holidays and on the occasion of festivals and fairs. Gambling was regarded as an ordinary

pastime, and was indulged in by almost everybody. If a man did not gamble, he was thought a miser, one who loved money more than anything else. Gambling was sometimes a sign of wealth and generosity, and for this reason a gambler stood high in the estimation of the people.

These people were mostly illiterate, and as with other people in similar circumstances, ignorance went hand in hand with superstition ; in fact, the Arabs were the most superstitious of people. They believed in evil spirits which lived in dark and solitary places, and caused disease and ill-luck, and thought that all such spirits could be kept in control with the help of spells and charms. These charms could be obtained from soothsayers and fortune-tellers, in whom the Arabs had great faith. The soothsayer told them when to go on a journey, and interpreted omens for them. For instance, if a bird flew across their path from left to right, they thought that it would lead to something good, but if it flew from right to left, it was a bad omen and meant disaster.

The Arabs had very strange ideas about the human soul. They thought that it was something very small which entered the human body at the time of birth and continued to grow until the person died. When death took place the soul took on the form of an owl and kept hovering over the tomb. If the man had been killed by some enemy, the bird cried, 'Give me water, give me water,' and did not cease till the murder had been avenged.

Such were the people amongst whom Muhammad was born, and it was through his efforts that they became one nation and a mighty people.

The parents of Muhammad belonged to the Quraish, a very powerful and influential tribe which occupied Mecca. It was believed that the Quraish were descended from Ishmael, the elder son of the prophet Abraham, just as the Jews were

descended from Isaac, his younger son. This tribe could boast of many wise and powerful leaders, one of whom had been Qusayy. He was a born leader of men, not only in the time of peace but also in war. As their acknowledged leader, he was entrusted with the flag of the tribe ; and it was he who presided over the meetings of the heads of families. He was very generous and kind-hearted, and arranged that all the poor pilgrims who came to Mecca, should be guests of the people and be provided with food and drink for three days without charge. His influence with his people was so great that they all carried out his instructions willingly.

Hashim, one of the grandsons of Qusayy, became as famous and powerful as his grandfather. He was extremely rich and very generous. Once, when famine broke out in Mecca, he distributed amongst the people foodstuffs, which he had bought from Syria—an act which was always remembered with gratitude by the people and which earned him their undying respect.

The Arabs lived mainly by trade, for which Hashim obtained many facilities for them. He made treaties with the Emperors of Rome and Persia as well as with the King of Abyssinia, which enabled the Quraish of Mecca to trade with those countries without any difficulty. He also concluded alliances with other tribes in Arabia, and as a result the Quraish were able to trade, unmolested, anywhere.

Towards the end of his life, Hashim made a journey to Medina, where he met a lady named Salma. She was of noble birth and a lady of great charm and fine character. Hashim fell in love with her and married her. Unhappily he died soon afterwards while on a trading expedition to Syria, but before he died Salma gave birth to a son, named Abdul Muttalib, who afterwards became the grandfather of the Prophet Muhammad.

When Abdul Muttalib grew to manhood, he became the chief of Mecca, and many things which he did while he was chief, are remembered to this day. It is said that the famous and ancient well of Zamzam, whose water was considered holy, had been filled up with earth. Abdul Muttalib found the well, had all the earth taken out, so that once again it began to yield cool, sweet and sparkling water. The people flocked from far and near to drink at the well, and blessed Abdul Muttalib for rediscovering it. This well exists to this day and every pilgrim to Mecca takes back with him some of the holy water.

As Abdul Muttalib's power and influence grew day by day, certain people became very jealous of him, but he always acted wisely when dealing with his enemies. He thought that much of his success depended upon the number of his sons, and he prayed to God to give him ten sons. His prayer was granted, and the youngest son, who was named Abdullah, became the father of the Prophet Muhammad.

Abdullah married the Lady Amina, who belonged to a very noble family. She became a widow very shortly after her marriage, because her husband, like his father before him, was taken ill on his way back from Syria and died. Three months after his death, on April 20th, 571 A. D. Muhammad, the Holy Prophet, was born at Mecca.

When Abdul Muttalib heard of the birth of his grandson his joy knew no bounds, and, together with the leading men of his tribe, he went at once to see the child. He took him in his arms to the Kaaba, and there offered prayers for his long life and prosperity. The child was named Muhammad. His mother loved to call him Ahmed, and the Prophet is known by both these names. The two words 'Muhammad' and 'Ahmed' have the same meaning.

It was not customary for noble Arab ladies at that time to nurse their babies, so a nurse had to be found. His first

nurse was Suwaibia, one of his uncle's slaves, whom the Prophet loved and honoured all his life. It is said he always treated her with the utmost kindness and respect, and provided her with clothes and money as long as she lived. Suwaibia had not nursed the child very long before he was given to Haleema, of the tribe of Bani Sa'ad. Haleema was, at first unwilling to take charge of the child, because he was an orphan and the care of him was not likely to be very profitable for her, but finally she agreed to do so. She was very kind to him and gave him as much love and affection as any mother, so that he thrived well under her charge. The desert life made him sturdy and strong, and he learnt to speak Arabic very fluently. In after life someone asked him the secret of his eloquent speech, and he replied that it was because he had been brought up amongst the Bani Sa'ad who were famous for their love of, and aptitude for, poetry.

The Prophet lived with his foster-mother till he was six years old, and he never forgot her kindness to him. Whenever she was in trouble, he came to her help. Once during a severe famine, when she sought his help, he gave her a camel, some sheep and a quantity of food. He always loved her as his own mother, and on one occasion when she went to see him at Medina, he was so overcome with emotion, that he cried, 'My mother, my mother.'

When Muhammad was six years old, Haleema took him back to his mother. Shortly after, Lady Amina went to Medina to visit the grave of her husband and took her little son along with her. They stayed at Medina with a near relative for about a month. Muhammad was not, however, destined to enjoy his mother's society for long, for on their way home she fell ill and died. When Muhammad visited his mother's

grave fifty-three years afterwards, he was deeply moved, and could not restrain his tears.

After his mother's death, Muhammad went to live with his grandfather Abdul Muttalib, who took great interest in his welfare. But Abdul Muttalib was then eighty years of age, and when two years afterwards, he also died, Muhammad went to live under the care of his uncle Abu Talib.

At that time Muhammad was a fine example of an Arab boy, who loved the wide desert and the hills and valleys that lay round it. Most boys of his age grazed sheep and goats, and he, too, loved this healthy, open-air life. With them he shared such sports as are loved by boys, and together they wandered over hill and dale. As a result, he grew up a manly and robust youth, but in spite of his bodily strength, he did not lose his gentle disposition. Such was the charm of his manners, his winning courtesy and the refinement of his speech, that all who came in contact with him loved him. His unassuming modesty, the humility of his spirit and his love of truthfulness made a deep impression upon everybody. Abu Talib, who himself was a good and kindly person, was very proud of his nephew.

Muhammad was now twelve years old, and up to this time had led a very quiet and sheltered life. The call of adventure, however, came to him, and he wanted to visit new countries and learn about strange men and their ways. The opportunity came when his uncle resolved to go to Syria on a trading expedition. Abu Talib thought Muhammad was too young to bear the hardships of the long journey, but Muhammad would not listen to him and insisted on going with him. He was told that Syria was a long way off and that the journey was uncomfortable, but none of these

things had any effect upon him. He delighted at the thought of a long journey, because it would afford him the opportunity of seeing strange lands, of meeting interesting people and listening to their tales of adventure round the camp-fire.

It is said that in Syria he met an Arab monk named Bahira, who was so impressed by his intelligence and noble mind that he prophesied a great future for him, and begging his uncle to guard him from all harm, said, 'This boy is destined to be the liberator of his country and the saviour of his people. You should, therefore, see to it that he does not fall a victim to the intrigues of his enemies.'

When he returned from Syria, Muhammad led a very quiet and uneventful life, and being a person of a contemplative turn of mind, he was usually deep in his own thoughts. At this time were laid down the foundations of that strength of purpose which stood him in such good stead in later years.

After the death of his grandfather there was no strong man in Mecca to take the lead, and to set an example to the people. The inhabitants became more wicked and dissolute than ever, and the strong began to oppress the weak, and finally matters came to such a pass that even defenceless travellers were openly robbed. Some of the inhabitants, who were sensitive to injustice, called a meeting, to which some of the leading citizens of Mecca, mostly Muhammad's relations, were invited. They all took an oath to protect every one from injustice, and to ensure the safety of all the travellers who visited Mecca. They decided that if any traveller was robbed, they would make good his loss out of their own pockets. Muhammad took great interest in all this, for he was the sworn enemy of oppression.

Muhammad's great desire, at that time, was to be of some service to his uncle. He tended his sheep and cattle,

an occupation which suited his temperament, for it gave him an opportunity to be alone with his thoughts. The contact with nature also helped to strengthen his character.

He did not enter fully into the life around him, but occasionally went to some fair, where contests in poetry or rhetoric were held. He was very interested in things of this kind, for it enabled him to satisfy his love of learning and public speaking.

As a young man of twenty-five Muhammad was quite unlike other young men of the same age, many of whom led gay and dissolute lives, drinking, gambling and swearing. In contrast to theirs, his life was a fine example of simplicity, his manners were modest and unassuming, and his bearing upright. Loyal to his friends and generous towards his enemies, the Prophet was kind and tolerant towards all. He was very fond of children, and took a great interest in their games. He was never frightened by difficulties, and was known as a steady and reliable youth who would never do anything petty, mean or dishonest. It is no wonder that the people of Mecca had such admiration for his character that at Amin they called him Al-Amin, the Faithful.

He was just as handsome in appearance as he was noble in character. He had a fine head set on broad shoulders, and his arched eyebrows and piercing eyes denoted insight and intelligence. He had a shapely nose, and even, white teeth, and a full beard which lent dignity to his countenance.

Such was Muhammad at twenty-five, an attractive, intelligent and reliable youth, well-known for the integrity of his character and the nobility of his soul.

Up to this time Muhammad had not undertaken any business on his own account, but as his uncle's affairs had become less prosperous, he had to find employment for

himself. He, therefore, took service with Khadija, a wealthy widow of Mecca.

Khadija's parents had been wealthy and had given her a very rich dowry. She had been married twice, and both her husbands had been men of means. She was forty years of age, and it afforded her great pleasure to help honest and deserving young men, by lending them capital with which to trade in foreign countries, in return for getting a share of the profits. By this means she added greatly to her wealth, but throughout it all, she remained humble and modest, and the inhabitants of Mecca called her 'the Pure'.

Khadija gave Muhammad the money to buy goods with which to trade, and with these he set out with a caravan for Bostra in Syria. There he sold the goods with much profit, and returned with an unusually large sum of money. He went to his mistress and gave her an account of his journey; and when she heard all that he had done, and the profits he had made, she thought him to be an extraordinary person. His upright bearing, his attractive manners and the truthfulness of his speech filled her with admiration. Little by little she began to love him and expressed a wish to marry him. Though the difference in their respective ages was great, Muhammad had a high regard for the lady for her many virtues, and they were married.

Muhammad lived happily with his wife for a number of years. They were devoted to each other, and their love continued during the whole of their lives. They had six children, two of whom were boys.

After his marriage Muhammad's fortunes grew, since all the wealth of Khadija was at his disposal, and he made the best possible use of it. His business prospered and he rose steadily in the estimation of the people, all of whom respected and trusted him. So great was his reputation

for honesty that people deposited their moneys and valuables with him. Muhammad administered the trust faithfully, and thereby won the confidence of everyone.

At this time an incident occurred, which proved Muhammad's wisdom and resourcefulness in finding a way out of difficulties. The Prophet was about thirty-five years old when the Kaaba was destroyed by heavy rains, and the inhabitants of Mecca decided to rebuild it. The building of the Kaaba was regarded by them all as a sacred work, and no effort was spared to finish it as quickly as possible. When the walls had been built and the roof put on, a dispute arose among the tribes which threatened to disturb not only the peace of the city but of the whole of Arabia. They could not decide amongst themselves which tribe should have the honour of putting the Black Stone in its place. Each tribe considered itself superior to the others, and eagerly coveted the honour, even to the point of fighting for it. Finally, someone suggested that the man who entered the Kaaba first should arbitrate in the matter. This suggestion was accepted by everyone, and they all agreed to abide by the decision of the first comer. To the surprise and joy of all, Muhammad was the first to enter the shrine that day, and he was hailed immediately as the arbiter. It was by no means a pleasant task, yet Muhammad did not shirk it, and soon solved the difficulty in a way which satisfied everybody. He spread his mantle on the floor and placed the Sacred Stone on it. He then asked the four principal chiefs of the tribes to take hold of the four corners of the mantle, with the Black Stone on it, and lift it into its place. In this way an open quarrel was avoided, and the honour and pride of each tribe satisfied. Thus did Muhammad show his capacity

for leadership, and his ability to handle a difficult situation in a satisfactory manner.

During all these years of prosperity and happiness, Muhammad did not forget his uncle who had been so good to him. Fortune had not favoured Abu Talib, and he found it impossible to support all his family. There was, too, at that time, a famine in the land, so in order to help his uncle, Muhammad adopted one of his sons. This was Ali, who afterwards became a famous warrior.

Muhammad was the soul of kindness, and his influence was felt and never forgotten by those around him. One man, who fell under the magic charm of his personality, was a slave named Zaid, who had been presented to him by his wife. He was an inhabitant of Syria, who, early in life, had been captured by robbers and sold as a slave. After passing through many hands he was bought by Khadija, who made him the personal attendant of Muhammad. A strong and deep attachment sprang up between the two, and when Zaid was offered his freedom he preferred to stay with his master and refused to go back to his home with his father.

At the age of forty, and though outwardly at peace with the world, Muhammad really felt sad and depressed. He saw around him poverty, cruelty and injustice. The Meccans had forgotten God and lived lives of wickedness. The strong persecuted the weak and the rich were proud and haughty. They all worshipped idols and forgotten the true worship of God.

All these things weighed heavy on his mind. He wanted to put an end to the ignorance and degradation into which his people had fallen, and above all it was his great desire that they should turn to the worship of the one true God. He spent anxious hours trying to devise some means by which his people

might become better men and women, but the difficulties were great and it was a long time before the light of truth came to him.

Near Mecca there is a lofty hill called the Mountain of Light, at the foot of which is a cave. The view from this cave is bleak and rugged. On the east and south, lofty mountain peaks can be seen ; while on the north and west the country is barren and desolate. Muhammad used to go to this cave whenever he wanted to rest or think. Here he pondered over the problems of life and death ; and here he meditated on the condition of his people. The cave offered him a refuge from the turmoil of the world and the agony of his own mind. One day in the cave, when he was deep in thought, he saw a strange light. Immediately after this he heard a commanding voice, which told him that he was the Prophet of God, whom God had called to show the path of truth to humanity. He was to teach people that there is only one God, and that there is no other God except Him and that He alone should be worshipped.

It was a great task which he had been given—this task of reclaiming his people. How was he to accomplish it ? He knew his people and their evil ways. He knew how cruel they were. He wondered if he could persuade them to forsake the paths of sin and pleasure. He felt that they would not take him seriously, but would denounce him as a false prophet, and perhaps abuse him and plan his death. He realised that, in spite of his position, he would be alone, friendless and helpless. What would he do if they all combined against him ?

Doubts, such as these, beset him, but during all these difficult days he was sustained by the conviction that God was on his side, so he quietly set about his work, and exhorted those nearest him to believe in the one, true God, and forsake the worship of idols. He asked them to embrace

Islam, which meant the complete and implicit surrender of their will to God. He said, 'There is no god but God ; God the most Merciful, the Lord of absolute will, the Master of men and the King of the world ; the judge on the Day of Reckoning ; the true Omnipotent who begetteth not, nor is begotten by any, the like of whom exists not in the universe.' He further said that when the world began, all the people cherished this splendid and noble faith, but as time passed, belief in the one true God waned. To re-affirm this true faith, God had sent a prophet to every country, but their teachings had been lost, and he, Muhammad, had been sent to the whole world and as the last of prophets.

To capture the imagination of the people he gave, in verse, vivid descriptions of Heaven and awe-inspiring pictures of Hell. 'Heaven,' he said, 'would be the blissful abode of the righteous, and the tortures of Hell would be the miserable lot of sinners. In Heaven there would be fragrant gardens and vineyards, but in Hell there would be boiling water and fires that would burn the bones to ashes.'

The Prophet knew that the time had not yet come to give this message to all the people ; so, at first, he took into his confidence only his own near relatives and intimate friends. Khadija was the first person to whom he spoke about it. She had such perfect faith in him that she believed forthwith, and became the first Muslim. Ali, who was then only a boy, and Zaid, the slave whom he had set free, were also converted to Islam. But it was not only the members of his household who adopted this new religion ; some wealthy merchants and some brave warriors also accepted it. Such were Abu Bakr, Usman and Sa'ad. Abu Bakr was one of the most respected citizens of Mecca, and a fine man. He was about the same age as the Prophet, in whom he had implicit faith. When he was told that Muhammad claimed to be a Prophet, he said "That

must be true, for my friend always speaks the truth.' Usman afterwards married the Prophet's second daughter and became the third Caliph; and Sa'ad became the conqueror of Persia.

But most of the converts were humble persons, slaves and poor artisans. The Prophet gave them his message secretly in a small house in the city or near the hill outside it. He taught them how to say their prayers, and recited to them soul-stirring verses from the Holy Quran. Thus he imbued these people with the love of God, and infused into their minds zeal for a godly life.

Muhammad's teaching was, in the beginning, carried on secretly, but afterwards he began to preach his religion publicly to the people of Mecca. Some of them resented the new faith and did all that they could to suppress it. In vain the Prophet argued with them about the uselessness of idolatry and the worthlessness of idols. At first though they listened to his pleadings, they neither said nor did anything, and later they even became hostile. They decided to worship idols that could not even help them, rather than God, the Almighty, who has made us and who protects us at all times. There were, also, other reasons why they did not like Islam. It asked them to give up their life of sin and to reform, whereas they were not willing to give up their pleasures and their evil ways. The call to a purer and nobler life did not appeal to them. They also felt jealous of the growing power of Muhammad, for they feared lest the leadership of the people should pass into his hands and into those of the members of his tribe. They also viewed with alarm the doctrine of equality which Islam preached. 'How could labourers be our equals?' said the horrified chiefs of Mecca. 'We are born to govern and they are born to serve. How can the shrub of the desert be equal to the palm tree that grows there?'

So they tried to make trouble for the Prophet, and when offers of bribery failed, they threatened him with persecution. They even tried to bring pressure to bear on Abu Talib and asked him to persuade his nephew not to preach against their faith, but Abu Talib was so convinced of the sincerity and earnestness of the Prophet that he refused to listen to them. When the Meccans realised that the Prophet was determined to carry on his crusade against the worship of idols and to continue to persuade the people to worship the one and only true God, they grew desperate and relentless in their persecution. They began to persecute the Muslims, as the followers of the Prophet were called, so that it became almost impossible for them to go about the streets of Mecca. The Meccans scattered thorns and dug pits in their path to annoy them. These persecutions affected the rich and the poor alike, both the masters and their slaves, but the slaves suffered most. They were often beaten by their masters, and made to lie either on live charcoals or on the burning sands. Abu Bakr and Khadija tried to put a stop to such ill-treatment and spent money freely in buying freedom for the slaves.

These sufferings were inflicted not only on the men but also on the women, some of whom were beaten to death and others deprived of their eyesight. Nothing, however, would induce these people to give up Islam or their faith in Muhammad, and one Abyssinian slave, named Balal was dragged through the streets of Mecca and made to lie on the sand in the scorching heat of the sun. There he was flogged, but instead of giving up his faith he cried out, 'God is one, God is one.'

The Muslims were persecuted so much in Mecca that they decided to take refuge in Abyssinia, but their persecutors even followed them there, and asked

the King of Abyssinia to banish them from his country. This he refused to do, because he was a believer in fair play and wanted to hear what the Muslims had to say for themselves, before he took any action against them. Ja'afar, brother of Ali, then told the king all about the new religion, and how it had made men of them. The king was so impressed with what he heard that he refused to give them up and allowed the refugees to stay in the country. Meanwhile, in Mecca, things went from bad to worse. The Quraish were determined to put down Islam but were unsuccessful, for Islam continued to spread and found favour with many people. Two of the most influential and notable converts at this time were Hamza and Omar, and their adhesion to the new faith was a most notable event. Omar, particularly, had at one time been such a determined foe of the new religion that he had made up his mind to kill Muhammad. He probably would have done so had not someone suggested to him that, before dealing with Muhammad, he should first enquire into the conduct of his sister and her husband, who had both become Muslims. He was so stung by this remark that he rushed at once to the home of his sister. He found her and her husband reading verses from the Holy Quran, and this made him all the more angry. Without stopping to think, he attacked them and beat them unmercifully, but they would not give up their faith in spite of his cruelty. His sister's courage and the sight of her bleeding face so touched the heart of Omar that he himself embraced Islam. His conversion was a great accession to the strength of the Muslims.

The effect of these conversion was to stiffen the opposition of the non-Muslims to the followers of Muhammad.

They realised that if Islam continued to spread so rapidly, all their power and influence would soon be gone. They said, 'We are the leaders of Mecca now, but soon we shall be no better than slaves.' A council of war was held and they decided to boycott the Muslims. 'We will not give our daughters in marriage to the tribe of Muḥammad, nor will we take theirs. We will have no business dealings with the Muslims and will not sell them any food. We will not be content until Muhammad is delivered up to us.' An agreement to this effect was drawn up and hung in the Kaaba, which meant that it was to be faithfully and religiously observed.

After this edict none of the members of the tribe of Muhammad could get any food. They all gathered in the quarter of Abu Talib and suffered so severely from hunger that they were forced to live on the leaves of trees and dry skins. Despite their sufferings nothing could make them disown their faith, and they possessed the same indomitable spirit which had led the Prophet to say to Abu Talib, on an earlier occasion, 'O uncle, should they place the Sun in my right hand and the Moon in my left, in order to make me renounce this mission, it shall not be. I will never give it up until it shall please God to make it triumph or until I perish in the attempt.'

This state of affairs continued for three years, at the end of which the Quraish themselves, thinking that the punishment was too severe and unjust, withdrew the edict. But the ordeal through which they had passed, had put the faith of the Muslims to a severe test, and out of their trials they had derived unity and strength.

The Prophet had triumphed but his own troubles were not yet over. Soon afterwards his cause suffered loss through the death of his uncle, Abu Talib who, though not a Muslim himself, had been a tower of strength to the.

Prophet. Even worse for him was the death of his devoted wife, Khadija, who had always been his best comforter and helper. It is because of these two bereavements that the year came to be known as the 'Year of Grief'.

Though active persecution stopped, the Quraish resorted to other means of interfering with the Prophet's preaching activity, and did their best to keep others from listening to him.

When he went to deliver his message to the inhabitants of Talif, a place near Mecca, he met with little encouragement, the people displaying greater hostility than even his enemies at Mecca. They interrupted him many times during his discourse and would not allow him to finish it. They insulted him; they jeered and even pelted him with stones. Although he was exhausted and bleeding, they would not let him rest, and continued to ill-treat him until he was three miles from the city. Then they left him, and the owner of a garden nearby felt compassion for him, and sent him some fruit.

These he took and praised God for His blessings, and the servant who brought the fruit was so impressed with the nobility of the Prophet that he at once embraced Islam.

Such discouragement would have broken the spirit of any man, but Muhammad persevered. During the days of pilgrimage to the Kaaba, he preached to several of the tribes, but none of them, except some pilgrims from Medina, would listen to him. The latter heard what he had to say, and six of them accepted Islam. In course of time the number of his followers in Medina increased, and he sent a special missionary to preach the faith to them. Thus Medina accepted what Mecca had, so far, rejected.

The Prophet was so impressed with the sincere devotion and the deep-rooted faith of the Muslims of Medina, that when some of them came to see him, he expressed a

wish to live amongst them. The inhabitants of Medina welcomed this proposal and said that they would be glad to have him in their midst. He warned them of the danger in which they would be placed, if he went to live amongst them. He said that it might lead to war with the whole of Arabia and spell disaster, desolation and death for them. But they were not daunted and replied, 'Why tell us about these things ; do we not know them already ? We will defend you to the last drop of our blood.' Then they swore undying friendship for Muhammad and departed.

Having been promised a safe refuge in Medina, the Muslims went there in small parties of three or four at a time, the Prophet himself being the last to go. Before he went, he wished to give back to the people the money and the ornaments which they had deposited with him. When the Quraish heard of his intentions to migrate to Medina, they became alarmed, and said, 'If Islam takes root in Medina, very soon it will overpower us. Let us, therefore, devise means to put an end to the heresy as soon as possible.' A meeting was, therefore, held and many suggestions put forward. It was decided finally that the Prophet should be put to death, and that one member for each tribe should be chosen to perpetrate the deed. This decision was accepted by everyone and steps were taken to carry it out as soon as possible.

One night, all those who had been chosen went to the house of the Prophet, determined to take his life, but he had been warned of the danger and left the house in the dead of the night while the would be assassins lay asleep before his door, leaving Ali asleep in his bed. Great was their disappointment, therefore, when, in the morning, they found that the Prophet had escaped and Ali had been left behind in his place.

They did not, however, forsake their intention. They

searched everywhere for the Prophet who, in the meantime, had taken shelter in a cave. It is said that some pursuers went almost up to the mouth of the cave, and when Abu Bakr heard the sound of their footsteps, his courage failed him, and he felt afraid, not for his own life but for the life of him whom he regarded as his redeemer. The Prophet set his doubts and fears at rest and spoke words of good cheer. In reply to Abu Bakr's despairing question, 'what shall we do now? We are only two.' 'Fear not,' he said, 'God is with us,' and God did protect them, for their pursuers left the place without entering the cave.

At the end of a journey lasting thirteen days, the Prophet came to a place near Medina, where he rested for some time. When he entered the city he was given a great welcome. The inhabitants received him dressed in brightest robes, and the women greeted him from the house-tops. The little children, whom the Prophet always loved, were the happiest of all. Thus did the Prophet enter Medina amidst the rejoicings of its people. The inhabitants of Medina were afterwards known as Ansars or helpers; while the Muslims who had left Mecca were called Muhajirin. The Muslim era dates from this event.

At Medina the Prophet was looked upon as the chief Magistrate of the city. His first act was to build a mosque in which the people could pray. The walls of the mosque were made of mud and unbaked bricks, and it had a roof of palm leaves. The Prophet himself worked with the rest, despite the protests and entreaties of his followers, for by so doing, he wanted to teach the people that all honest work is noble and dignified.

Another task was to make provision for the refugees who had left their homes to share with him the hardships of life in the new city. He summoned to his aid all the Muslims of Medina, and asked each to take home with him

one refugee and to divide his property equally with him. It was a great act of self-sacrifice on their part, but each and all willingly agreed. They were all satisfied with their lot, as it afforded them an opportunity to further the cause of Islam.

The Prophet was aware of the continued hostility of the Quraish and knew that they had set a price upon his head, and that whoever killed him was to be given one hundred camels. They hated him, not only because he preached a new faith but also because, being in Medina, he was in a position to put a stop to their trade with Syria if he chose to do so. The prophet knew that hostilities might break out at any time between the inhabitants of Mecca and Medina, and to make his position secure he concluded an agreement between the inhabitants of Medina, both Jews and Arabs, whereby they were to defend Medina against any attack made upon it, and not to give protection of any kind to the Quraish. He also entered into similar alliances with other tribes.

The Prophet knew that the only way to bring the Quraish to reason and keep them from molesting him was to hamper their trade. Before any effective action had been taken by the Muslims, the Quraish sent an army of one thousand strong to protect a caravan, which carried goods worth several lacs of rupees, in the direction of Medina. It was a critical moment for the Muslims, and a council was called at which it was decided to give the enemy fight. Every Muslim capable of bearing arms rallied to the standard of the Prophet, and an enthusiastic but small force of three hundred and thirteen men set out to meet the army of the Quraish.

There was a marked contrast between the armies which met near the well of Badr, three stages from Medina. The Muslims were poor, ill-clad, and had very

few horses and camels, whereas the Quraish were well-equipped, three times in number and confident. When the Prophet saw them, he exclaimed, 'O God, if the Muslims are killed, who will then worship Thee on the earth?' Then he addressed his soldiers in these words, 'Courage, O faithful Muslims; fight fearlessly; stand firm; let fly your arrows; victory will be yours.' The battle began, and for a time the Quraish seemed to have the upper hand and the disheartened Muslims might have dispersed, but the Prophet urged them on to fight in the name of God. He prayed to God for victory, and then, taking a handful of sand, he scattered it into the air, saying in a loud voice, 'May God humble the pride of the Quraish.' At this point, the tide seemed to turn. The Muslims summoned all their strength and courage and fell upon the Quraish who began to lose ground. In the end the Quraish were defeated, and the Muslims took some of them as prisoners of war, but did not, as was the custom in those days, treat them unkindly.

It is very interesting to note that in this battle Abu Bakr and his son fought against each other. When, years afterwards, the son became a Muslim, he told his father how he had spared his life on the battle-field, but Abu Bakr said, 'I would not have spared your life if you had fallen into my hands. I love Islam more than I love anything on this earth.'

This reverse at the well of Badr rankled in the minds of the Quraish, and they soon collected an army of three thousand men and marched on Medina to avenge the defeat. The two armies met at Ohud, a few miles from Medina, the Quraish greatly outnumbering the Muslims, who were only seven hundred strong. Ali distinguished himself in this battle and

killed many of the enemy. But a sudden attack from the rear by the Meccans' cavalry commanded by Khalid turned the tables against the Muslims and threw their ranks into disorder. The position of the Muslims was made worse by a false report that Muhammad had been killed. When the Muslims heard this report, they lost heart and might have broken had they not soon learnt that the Prophet was alive.

The Prophet had been badly wounded, but was bravely defended by his devoted followers. At this time some of them suggested that the Prophet should pray to God to destroy their enemies, but the Prophet said, 'How can I do so? I have come to save, not to destroy.' Saying so, he raised his hands in prayer and said, 'O God, the Quraish know not what they do. Lead them into the right path.' The Meccans were at last compelled to retire.

The Quraish were not the only foes of Islam. The Jews also hated the Muslims and resented their growing influence. They concluded an alliance with the Quraish, and together they made a sudden descent upon Medina, this time with an army of ten thousand, under the command of Abu Sufian, the arch enemy of the Prophet. But the Muslims of Medina were not to be taken unawares. They already knew of the evil intention of the Jews, and had made ample preparations. Among other things, they had dug a deep ditch around Medina to protect it from sudden attack. This battle is known as the Battle of the Ditch. The Meccans made many efforts to cross the ditch, but Ali, the fearless warrior, saved every situation. All attempts to storm the fort in which the Muslim women and children had been lodged for safety, failed, because of the valour of Arab women. The bitter cold and lack of sufficient provisions told heavily upon the Meccans, and finally they were

compelled to withdraw. The victory consolidated the power of Muhammad, and resulted in the further spread of Islam.

Nevertheless, Mecca did not come under the influence of Islam, and refused to welcome back the Prophet, although he was now very powerful, and had a very large following. Confident in his strength, he resolved to make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca in the company of his followers. But when he reached Mecca the Quraish would not allow him to enter the city. He, therefore, camped at a place called Hudaibia, one day's march from Mecca. As there was fear of a sudden attack, the Prophet warned his men, and each man, clasping the hand of the Prophet, pledged himself to fight till death. In the meantime, the Prophet sent a message to the Quraish, saying, 'Let the Quraish know that I have not come to fight. My sole object is to make the pilgrimage, and as they have already suffered many losses in previous wars, I think it will be advantageous for them to make peace with us.' Many parleys took place between them, and it was decided to suspend war for ten years. An agreement was also made to the effect that if a Meccan embraced Islam and went to Medina, he would be sent back to Mecca, but if any Muslim went from Medina to Mecca, he would not be sent back. The Quraish did not allow the Prophet to visit Kaaba that year, but agreed to withdraw from Mecca next year for three days, during which time Muhammad and his followers might visit the sacred temple. It was also stipulated that the Muslims should enter Mecca with their swords in sheath, so as to avoid any breach of the peace.

The Muslims did not like the terms of the treaty, but the Prophet counselled patience, and said, 'God Almighty will surely help us.' He was right. The treaty of Hudaibia brought peace between the Muslims and the non-Muslims, and the doctrines of Islam were preached unhindered.

The Prophet took advantage of these years of peace to send missionaries to the remotest corners of Arabia. As a result, Islam spread rapidly. Not content to make converts only in his own country, he also sent embassies to the Roman Emperor, the Persian Emperor, the Governor of Egypt and the King of Abyssinia. Some of these kings received these messengers with much courtesy and gave them patient hearing, but others were indifferent or hostile to the new religion.

The troubles of the Prophet were not yet ended. The Jews of Khaibar, two hundred miles from Medina, were alarmed at the progress of Islam, and disliked the new religion. They incited some of the tribes to carry on war against Muhammad, and aided them by giving them shelter, and in various other ways. The Prophet put up with these activities for some time, and even tried to make peace with the Jews, but they could not understand this and attributed his attitude to weakness, and not to good nature. In the end they went too far and killed some messengers which the Prophet had sent to make peace. This treachery made Muhammad very angry, and he ordered an attack on the city. There were about twenty thousand Jews in the city, and the Muslim soldiers, both on foot and on horse, numbered only sixteen hundred. The Jews laughed at this little army, counting it but a poor little band of men, but they did not realise that it was fired with religious zeal, and was led by Muhammad himself. The Jews proved no match for the Muslims, losing one fort after another. Only one fort offered much resistance, but in the end this too was stormed by Ali, the renowned warrior, and taken. The Jews were defeated, but were left in possession of the city and their lands on payment of rent.

An army was also sent to punish Shurahbeel, the Arab chief of Bostra in Syria, who had killed the messengers

whom the Prophet had sent to him. This army, which numbered three thousand, was commanded by Zaid, the freed slave. This was distasteful to many of the people. 'Why should a man who was once a slave,' they asked one another, 'be chosen in preference to those who are of noble birth?' When the Prophet heard this, he marvelled at their stupidity and short-sightedness. 'It is not birth that matters,' he said to them, 'but worth'. Because a man is of lowly birth he should not be deprived of promotion if he deserves it by merit. Islam will recognise no such artificial distinctions, but will give equal chances to all.' The expedition, however, resulted in disaster for the Muslims who were outnumbered by their enemies.

At that time the Prophet received a complaint from a certain tribe that they had been attacked by the allies of the Quraish. This pained him very much, and he asked the Quraish to make reparations for the people who had been slain or to disown the offending tribe. The Quraish refused to do either and said that they were prepared for war. Thereupon, Muhammad, with an army of more than ten thousand men, advanced on Mecca. The Quraish who were really not in a position to offer any resistance tendered their submission to the conqueror, without a fight, and thus did Mecca receive back the Prophet whom it had previously driven out. The first thing that Muhammad did on entering the city, was to go to the Kaaba, and throw out the many idols which he found there. He also effaced the pictures on the walls of the sacred temple. On this occasion he addressed the people, and said, 'There is only one God, and all men are equal. The nobility of a man depends not on his birth, but on his merits, his conduct and the purity of his life.' He also told them that blood feuds must be abolished, for they led to war.

Mecca, which the Prophet loved so much, thus became the centre of Islam, and Arabia became a country both politically and religiously united. Islam had not only won spiritual supremacy in Arabia, but also political sovereignty, and this conquest had been brought about with very little bloodshed. Muhammad treated the people gently and mercifully, and once strongly rebuked Khalid, now become a Muslim, who had been guilty of an unnecessary act of cruelty. When the Meccans came to him, suing for peace, he asked them, 'What can I give to you who have given me so much trouble?' 'Mercy, good brother,' they cried with one voice. 'You shall have it,' he said with a touch of magnanimity. 'Go to your homes and live as free men.' This gesture of generosity won the hearts of everybody.

Soon after news was brought to him of the turbulence of the Hawazin tribe, who were noted for their bravery and skill in archery. The Muslims marched upon them, but their first attack was repelled. Muhammad then spoke to them such encouraging words that they advanced quickly again to the attack and put the enemy to flight. Many of the Hawazins were taken prisoners, among them being Shaima, daughter of the Prophet's nurse and his foster-sister. Shaima was at that time a matron of seventy years, and proudly told the Muslim soldiers of her relationship with the Prophet, but no one would believe her. When she was brought into the presence of the Prophet, she recalled to him many interesting events of his childhood, which moved the Prophet so much that he paid her the very great honour of spreading his own mantle on the ground for her to sit upon. Afterwards he sent her home and made her many presents of camels, sheep and other things.

This was the last war in which Muhammad took part. By this time most of the people of Arabia had accepted Islam. In spite of early troubles there, he was very fond of

Mecca, and shortly before his death, when he visited the city to perform the Hajj, he delivered his last great message to the Muslims. 'Every Muslim is a brother to his co-religionists,' he said, 'and all Muslims constitute one brotherhood.' He went on to ask them to treat the slaves well, to give them the same food that they themselves ate, and to clothe them with the clothes that they themselves wore. The sincerity of his words brought conviction to all that listened.

Not long after his return to Medina, Muhammad became very ill, and feeling that his end was near, he went to the mosque and there he asked the Muslims, who gathered round him, if he had been unkind or unjust to anybody. He told them that he had never willingly done harm to anyone, neither had he tried to take anything from another by force. If any person thought that he had ever done an unjust thing, he was ready to make amends for it. Only one man stood up from amongst the vast throng assembled there and said, 'You once took three dirhems from me, but I have not yet received them back. Will you please give them to me now ?' The Prophet was pleased with these words, and said, I thank you for reminding me of that. You shall be repaid.' Then he passed away peacefully. His body was laid in state, and Abu Bakr delivered the funeral speech and offered prayers over him.

Muhammad was the soul of simplicity and sincerity. He was respected by everyone. He was not ashamed to do the humblest kind of work. He milked his goats, patched his clothes and mended his own shoes. He loved his camel and tended it very carefully. He was good to the poor, and no one ever appealed to him for help in vain.

He was the Emperor of all Arabia, but greatness did not turn his head, and when he went out in the company

of other people, he would not have them follow him at respectful distance, as servants do with their masters. He would always mix freely with them, as if he were one of them, and avoided everything which might draw attention to himself. He said that he was a humble creature of God, in no way different from his fellow-men.

Wealth and fame and other worldly things held no attractions for him in a world which was, for him, only a temporary resting place. 'I am as a mounted wayfarer who rests at noon under the shade of a tree,' he once said, 'and then proceeds on his way.'

Muhammad was frugal in his habits, and preferred simple food such as dates, barley, wheat, meat and milk. If his host served him with an elaborate meal, he partook of it gladly, but never forgot to remind him politely that he preferred a meal with only one course. His dress was always simple. He did not like to put on silken clothes because he thought they were a sign of effeminacy, and never minded if his garments were patched, so long as they were clean.

The Prophet's relations with his friends are well-known. Amongst his friends he behaved as if he were one of them, and did not allow them to think that he was their superior. Above all he was sincere and kindly in his treatment of others. When he shook hands with any one, there was friendship in the clasp of his hand. He had a smile for everyone and received people in a gracious manner. In the company of his friends he unbent himself, and indulged in innocent jokes. He would never allow an ill word to be spoken of an absent friend, and wished everybody to think well of other. Such conduct on his part ensured for him the friendship and confidence of many people. Abu Bakr would have given up everything that he possessed rather than lose his friendship, so greatly was he attached to him.

Zaid, the slave whom he had freed, was so devoted to him that he preferred to stay with him rather than go away with his father. With many other people, too, he formed the closest and most abiding friendships.

Generosity was the keynote of all his dealings. He was generous in small things as well as great. He never rebuked his servants, even when they had committed an offence. He forgave his enemies readily, for he believed that it was only by forgiveness that a man could win them over. It is said of Muhammad that at his death he prayed to God to forgive one of his enemies, who had spent his whole life plotting to destroy Islam and inciting others to do the same thing. It has been told how the inhabitants of Mecca who had been so bitter towards him, received the most generous treatment at his hands when he finally conquered the city.

He was never known to send away a beggar empty-handed from his door. When he had no money to give, he gave something else, and he often sacrificed his own comfort to provide for others. He regarded it as his duty to feed the hungry and to help the poor, and his sympathy was not for men only but extended also to animals. Once he was told about a man who had drawn water from a well for a thirsty dog at great personal discomfort, and he said that the man would go to heaven for his kindness to an animal in distress. The Arabs have always been noted for their hospitality, and Muhammad was the most hospitable of them all. He was very particular that his guests should have every care, and more often than not, he attended to their comforts himself.

He was the friend and protector of widows and orphans, and found it hard to forgive anyone who had wronged them. He enjoined upon everybody the necessity of taking care of the sick, and regarded it as the duty of every

Muslim to pay his last respects to the dead by attending the funeral.

His reputation for honesty and impartiality was so well-known throughout Arabia that people came to him to have their disputes settled, irrespective of the religion they professed. When it was a case of a dispute between a Jew and a Muslim, neither had any advantage over the other, because of his religion. The people had such great belief in his honesty that he was called 'the trustworthy.'

His courage was always equal to the occasion, and even at the most critical times it never deserted him. Those around him may have been depressed and dejected, but he remained as firm and self-confident as ever. Once, during a journey, he was resting alone under a tree, when one of his enemies came upon him with a drawn sword in his hand. Finding him in this helpless condition, the man beamed with delight and asked him with a sneer, 'Who will save you now?' 'God,' confidently replied the Prophet, without showing any trace of fear or anxiety. The would-be murderer lost his nerve and the sword fell from his hands.

Such was Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam.



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